

## Engaging Students Using Writing

\*Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have about assigning or responding to writing in your course. [werner@hope.edu](mailto:werner@hope.edu) | 616.395.7122 | Lubbers Hall 334.

When writing a prompt/giving an assignment, always ask yourself these three prep questions:

1. How can I help students connect the assignment to the course goals/objectives?
2. What ways can I scaffold the assignment into the class?
3. What ways can I give students context for the assignment?

### *Writing Assignments and Course Goals*

Every course has goals and objectives, and your writing assignments should help students meet these. Your writing assignments should be given to students with a specific purpose in mind. The assignment should help students achieve one or more course goals/objectives.

Consider adding an “Objectives” section on your assignment sheet that will help students connect the paper more directly to course goals: be sure to talk about this in class and to give students opportunities to make the connections themselves. You might consider asking them to fill out an evaluation before and after the assignment, for example (see Prof. Bill Moreau’s handout on page four in this packet for a good sample).

### *Scaffolding Assignments*

Scaffolding is when teachers help students build up support structures that help the students effectively write a paper or produce a larger project. The best ways to do this are to:

- assign elements of a paper (thesis, introduction, body paragraph, first draft, peer review) one at a time or work on them during class time (when they can be a part of the lesson).
- Take time in or outside of class to respond to student writing (can be very brief, but make sure the students are on the right track, which will save you headaches down the road).
- Assign in-class activities to give students needed skills for the project:
  - summary assignments if annotations are needed
  - Assign library workshops and source integration activities to prep students for research papers
- Frequently help students **remind themselves** of how and why the assignment is connected to the discipline, course content, and course goals
- Don’t be afraid to tell students about how you scaffold your own writing or what your process looks like--knowing more about how teachers in their discipline write will reinforce stronger writing habits

### *Giving Students Context*

Telling students an assignment is important isn’t enough--neither is telling students that fulfilling the assignment will help them fulfill a goal in the course. Instead, writing should be purposeful for students: it should have context in the class and be based on application. There are several ways to use writing in any classroom, and the three predominant are *writing to learn*, *learning to write*, and *writing to show knowledge*.

When we ask students to *write to learn*, we are asking them to do something very new: it could be informal or formal writing, but the whole point in asking students to write is to get them learning something new or otherwise grappling with new knowledge. Examples include written responses to assigned readings or class discussions, brainstorming new lab activities and protocols to test new hypotheses or theories, or writing a creative or formal analysis. For these assignments, the focus of comments and assessment is typically on content and only secondarily--if at all--on style and form.

*Learning to write* assignments help students understand the formalities and mechanics--the heuristics--of a discipline. These types of assignments can be a form of enculturation, especially for upperclass students. The most common form of *learning to write* is a term paper or original research paper, where we ask students to develop their own research interests or questions and then write an academic paper based on those questions/interests. Frequently, the paper is argumentative and functions as an undergraduate version of the scholarly, peer-reviewed research article. There are other types of *learning to write* writing assignments, though, including in-class activities, helping students craft and incorporate visuals into their documents, and even mini-lessons and workshops about a preferred disciplinary style. These types of assignments are the ones in which it is preferable to spend more time commenting on and assessing form, structure, and style.

Students frequently *write to show knowledge*, as well. This might also be combined with either of the other two types of writing students are asked to do. Showing knowledge might entail showing a wide array of knowledge from source material, it might mean an essay on a final exam that demonstrates the cumulative knowledge a student has gained from a course as well as the application of that knowledge. Overall, when assigning students this type of project, instructors should emphasize the importance of content and meeting the prompt requirements. For commenting and assessment purposes, content is of primary importance, as with *writing to learn* assignments. Writing to show knowledge is frequently an application essay: a final exam, a lab report, a book report or article summary. These types of writing assignments ask students to prove they have done the required coursework and synthesized it.

*Other questions to ask yourself about the prompt:*

1. How will a 17-23 year-old read this?
  - i. What are your language choices, style of writing, and clarity like?
  - ii. Did you write this for someone like you or someone like them?
2. Have I focused more on the purpose / content of the assignment or on the style / mechanics?
  - i. Unless you are specifically aiming to teach students technical aspects of writing for your discipline, your prompt should make clear that the content and meeting the purpose are the primary goals of the paper.
  - ii. Be clear that you expect a professional level of writing, but if you only focus on this, students will think formatting and grammar are more important than answering the prompt well.
3. How much text is on the assignment sheet?
  - i. Students, especially younger students, can get overwhelmed when an assignment sheet has too much text on it.
  - ii. You may think you are being helpful when you give students "get started" thoughts, questions, or ideas; however, this often confuses students more and makes them think they have to address *everything*.
  - iii. On the other hand, with too much text, some students will only listen to what you say and ignore the paper prompt completely, then write a paper that only vaguely addresses the prompt because they didn't read the prompt.
4. Have I revised the prompt?
  - i. Writing a prompt is like any other kind of writing, so treat give it your full process.
  - ii. You should show it to others in your department and get feedback on the prompt before assigning the project to students.
5. After assigning the prompt, have I asked students to make sense of it during class?
  - i. I ask students to write questions on anonymously on notecards that I collect. We answer these questions as a class to make sure everyone understands the prompt.
6. Have I identified students who may be struggling with the prompt?
  - i. You may want to reach out to these students if you notice they are struggling--they may be too afraid to reach out to you.

7. Have I made my expectations for due dates and reading drafts obvious?
  - i. I encourage you to offer students the opportunity to run a draft by you. You don't have to do that, but if you can, you should. Many students will **not** take you up on this offer. The same holds for revisions.
  - ii. Make sure students know when and how the final copy is due (day/time, upload/hardcopy); it's a good idea to also write this on the prompt.

### **On a Related Note: Responding to Student Writing**

"Responding to student writing is challenging for teachers, because it is difficult to write helpful, perceptive comments on student papers. [...] An important reason why written response is difficult is that teachers must decide what role or roles to play in their comments, such as **coach, judge, or doctor**. Research has shown, however, that teacher comment has little effect on the quality of student writing other than negative attitudes fostered by negative criticism. Also, **longer comments are less effective than shorter ones**, marginal notes and comments often give conflicting signals, and paternalistic **attitudes that measure writing against some Ideal Text cause students to lose interest**. Improved responses may be possible when teachers view **comments as rhetorical acts**, think about their **purpose for writing them**, and teach students to **become their own best readers**. To achieve this goal, teachers should respond to student drafts in the way they respond to their colleagues' drafts--**few judgments and directives, more questions and suggestions**. They should also comment **during the writing process**, before final grades are assigned, on **what is said** not how it is said."

~Keith Grant-Davie & Nancy Shapiro, 1987 CCCC, emphasis added

#### **Efficient Instructor Response Techniques**

*Content specific:* Address issues of the assignments purpose: whether the student has truly learned the content, demonstrated knowledge, or utilized critical application.

*Structure specific:* Focus on the organization and coherence of the writing.

*Style specific:* Focus on the sentence-level constructions and stylistic choices a student makes.

*Less is more:* Limit the amount of comments you provide and the length of those comments.

*Overarching comments only:* Typically a cover page or one chunk of writing at the end of the assignment.

*Marginal comments only:* Left in the margins of the paper, next to the students' text.

*Minimalist marking:* Leave all surface level errors unmarked in the sentences, but place a check mark at the end of the line for all errors in the line.

*As a Coach/Reader:* Use a coaching voice to respond and ask questions that prompt students to think further.

*As a Teacher/Judge:* Use an authoritative voice to explain what is lacking in the paper.

*As a Doctor:* Offer a "diagnosis" of the paper and methods for "fixing" the piece.

*Timer method:* Go ahead; time yourself!

*Set a "paper goal":* Review several papers a day to avoid large piles of papers at a time or over the weekend.

#### **Encouraging Student Response to Instructor Feedback**

*Incorporate Praise:* Always tell students about what is working in their text; give specifics.

*Encourage revision* Enforce a revision policy for students and consider offering feedback on early drafts.

*Assign reflections:* Students should respond to the feedback you've given them before they revise.

From Bill Moreau's *English 113—The Will to Survive—Evaluation Letter—04/26/2013*

Dear English 113 Scholar,

Please respond to the class you have just taken—English 113—The Will to Survive. What were the strengths of the class? What suggestions and/or specific ideas could you offer for any needed changes? Please be sure to include any other comments you'd care to make about any aspect of this class.

(P.S. You have also been asked by Hope to complete the online SALT evaluation. Please do that. Thank you.)

Here is a reminder list of some of what we did this past semester:

We got to know each other; we read *In Harm's Way*, *Not Without My Daughter*, and *The Hunger Games*; we had reading check "quizzes" on all of our reading assignments; we also wrote and shared informal responses to many of our reading assignments; we did some group work and responded to some question prompts covering our reading; we learned about what makes good writing, and responded to the Hacker chapters on word choice, sentence style, and punctuation; we learned background information on how to approach four different types of writing (extended narrative writing, informational writing, persuasive writing, and writing a review); with each of those four, we read and marked and talked about several samples (noticing the good writing too); we created brainstorming/prewriting for each type of writing; we created rough drafts of each type; we peer edited and shared our drafts with each other along the way; we also shared and turned in final drafts of each of those four types of writing; papers were returned with student samples and time to self-evaluate what was done well and what could be improved in your own writing; along the way, individual conferences with Moreau were offered in time slots and open office formats, and you were encouraged to visit the Center for Writing and Research; we wrote in response to the Hacker chapters on research writing/MLA format; we had three sessions in the library to help with research; we spent time looking at samples of successful research projects as examples; we shared presentations on our individual research findings; we were offered many "grade raise" opportunities along the way (perfect attendance, chapter summary writing on our three books, VWS events, review writing, and persuasive letter mailing); we wrote a Dear Mr. Moreau letter at midterm and again right now; we filled out a SALT evaluation; and we shared cupcakes, Valentine's candy, a few laughs, and more I might have omitted...

(over, please...)

Dear Mr. Moreau,

**(^--This is where students will flip over the handout and fill out their evaluation. Bill prefers this as a two-sided handout, but you could adapt this, and put it on Moodle, too. This evaluation can be adapted for multiple purposes in your classroom, and it can be a writing activity that gets students thinking about course context and goals as well as argument construction and writing style.)**